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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by Asia Pacific Women's Watch, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

Asia Pacific Women's Watch is a regional network organization that spreads across the five subregions of Asia and the Pacific. It represents the voices of this network and welcomes the priority theme for the fifty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women, "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges".

Asia Pacific Women's Watch recognizes that the priority theme is a prerequisite to the realization of the Beijing Platform for Action, the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which is the only human rights instrument that specifically addresses the situation of rural women. It also recognizes the opportunity for Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) to address situations specific to rural women in conflict and war-affected areas.

The Asia-Pacific is home to 60 per cent of the world's population. A large percentage of this population lives in rural areas, a significant proportion of which are women.

Rural women in the Asia-Pacific region face inequities based on gender and rooted in structural oppression through class, caste, race, religion, sexuality and ethnicity, among other factors. However, rural women should not be viewed as victims but as agents of change, as they struggle for rights, identity, dignity, empowerment and full potentiality. Asia Pacific Women's Watch recognizes the importance of understanding and acknowledging the complexity and dynamism of women who live in rural contexts and recognizes that strategies to address rural women's issues should vary depending on women's empirical realities. A "one policy fits all" solution cannot work.

Poverty is heavily concentrated in rural areas where development is impeded by the inadequate consideration given to it in national economic development policies and strategies, including poverty reduction strategies. The marginal allocation of resources to implement global and national policy commitments on rural development and the long-term neglect of the agricultural sector are also factors that impede the alleviation of rural women's poverty.

Globally, rural development strategies are negatively affected by neoliberal globalization in terms of commercialization of the agricultural sector, liberalization of trade and commoditization of food and other agricultural products. The increase in labour migration and the privatization of resources and services, including health services, have further marginalized and had an impact on rural women across the region.

The impact of this phenomenon at the national level is evident in the economic and development policies across the region. For rural women, this is reflected in the lack of access to quality services, including sexual and reproductive health services; non-existent or low-impact social security nets; the insecurity and vulnerability of livelihoods; violence; and the lack of food security and of access to resources.

In some instances, discriminatory sociocultural structures and practices, including unequal gender relations, are reinforced, causing a greater impact on rural women's lives. As women are most expected to act according to sociocultural norms and traditions, rural women are also vulnerable to discrimination and violence based

on sexual orientation and gender identity. Honour killings of and acid throwing on women in the region continue to violate women's right to life.

Despite the attention given to the situation and concerns of rural women and their critical contribution to rural development, their rights and priorities remain insufficiently addressed in legal frameworks, national and local development policies and investment strategies at all levels.

Financing for development, including for the agricultural sector, and domestic resource mobilization towards rural development are affected by inequitable resource allocation and the lack of political will to institute land reforms that recognize women's right to land ownership. Large-scale rural-urban migration is an added pressure in terms of access to services and resources. Asia Pacific Women's Watch reiterates the need for the inclusion of women in decision-making, where macroeconomic and microeconomic policies that would better serve women and men are conceptualized and implemented.

Inequalities and discrimination in women and girls' access to education, nutrition and health services, including sexual and reproductive health services, and access to and control over land, fishing resources and other productive resources, impede on women's opportunities for decent work, gainful employment, income-generating activities and full participation in public life.

Rural women face serious challenges in carrying out their multiple burdens in their productive and reproductive roles. Their situation is exacerbated in times of armed conflict, increasing religious fundamentalism and conservatism, natural disasters and disease epidemics, among others. Furthermore, the rights and priorities of rural women continue to be insufficiently addressed.

According to 1990-2008 estimates developed by the World Health Organization, the United Nations Children's Fund, the United Nations Population Fund and the World Bank, there are high levels of maternal mortality in countries of the region (340 per 100,000 live births in Bangladesh, 200 in Bhutan, 290 in Cambodia, 250 in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, 230 in India, 240 in Indonesia, 580 in the Lao People's Democratic Republic, 240 in Myanmar, 380 in Nepal and 260 in Pakistan) where about 80 per cent of the population lives in rural areas and where there are severe limitations in safe delivery services. Although international maternal mortality ratio estimates for the Pacific island countries are largely lacking, Fiji, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands are noted for high maternal mortality rates in the region.

With preventable causes, the issue of maternal deaths becomes an issue of national policy priorities. Multiple levels of discrimination and marginalization are experienced by women within communities where the maternal mortality ratio is highest, and these are also communities that are invariably linked with poverty.

Asia Pacific Women's Watch calls for the adoption of a continuum of care approach, in which the quality of care that both mother and newborn receive during pregnancy, at childbirth or during abortion, and in the early post-natal or post-abortion period is essential to ensuring that women remain healthy and that children get a strong start.

The push for one of the indicators of Goal 5 of the Millennium Development Goals (the presence of a skilled attendant at birth) is leaving out home deliveries

and a continuum of care in many of the developing countries in the region. There should be more skilled service providers at the community level, and traditional birth attendants and skills-building should be recognized as a part of the continuum of care for the maternal mortality ratio reduction strategy.

Issues relating to women with disabilities are an emerging concern in the Asia-Pacific region. It has been estimated that globally, there are 300 million women and girls with disabilities, of whom the majority live in developing countries. A detailed global picture on how gender and disability intersect is hampered by the unavailability of comprehensive data and the challenges of quantification in such fields as the feminization of poverty, cultural concepts of gender roles and sexual and reproductive rights, violence, abuse and other types of exploitation, such as child labour.

More than 50 per cent of women's livelihoods remain confined to the urban and rural informal sectors, where there is no provision for regulated remuneration, safe working environments or access to high levels of marketable skills development. Women's remuneration in these enterprises is most often half that of men.

The frequency of disasters, whether natural or human-made, in the Asia-Pacific region conclusively shows that disasters affect women and men differently. These gender differences need to be understood and integrated into disaster mitigation policies and programmes and integrated into disaster recovery programmes that rebuild communities and economies.

There is an urgent need to prioritize mechanisms to make national-level, gender-disaggregated data available. Asia Pacific Women's Watch calls upon all Governments and United Nations bodies to ensure the creation of enabling conditions, as clearly articulated in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Beijing Platform for Action and the Millennium Development Goals, to ensure that women and men have equal access to resources and marketable skills andto enhance their right to engage at all levels in decisions which affect their lives.